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AUTHOR Tohe, Laura
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ABSTRACT

Except in small doses, the language and literature of Native Americans remains invisible in the American school curriculum. Undergraduate literature classes fail to offer works by Native Americans just as the undergraduate curriculum offers few courses in Native American literature. Graduate schools frequently define minority literature as African-American and the contributions of Native Americans are neglected, distorted, or given minor attention. Consequently, students who are confronted with ethnic literature that is not "white man's literature" are initially unwilling to accept the credibility of either the literature or the native American instructor. A Native American female teaching predominantly White students struggled with these issues, and with the question of how to gain credibility and voice in the classroom. She decided that being honest and up front with students at the beginning of the semester concerning her own identity, presence, and voice, could help build a framework that focuses on history, cultural studies, art, and historical events. This framework can challenge students' comfortable world view and provide opportunities for them to reach for their own voices as they go beyond their self-made and culturally-made boundaries. (NH)

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Laura Tohe
13563 "W" Circle
Omaha, NE 68137-3019

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A Native American's Perspective on the Writing Classroom

To be a woman of color, a tribal woman in an academic setting means having to explain one's self. Despite the current move toward multicultural education, the voices of native women remains ignored or distorted by stereotypes. Moreover, the language, literature, and history of Native Americans are often invisible in university communities and in classrooms where mainstream students enter with stereotypical, romanticized, exoticized and idealized notions of Native American people as "the other." Native people have been part of the forming of this nation since the first European stepped on this soil yet students know little of the cultural diversity of this nation partly because the curriculum of most American schools fail to include subjects on People of Color as part of the regular curriculum.

Teaching students that come from a predominantly Euro-American background often means having to undo stereotypes and convince students that Native American people have contributed to the history, language, culture, literature and government of this country. Giving voice to Native American issues is one way that students' education can be enhanced.

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"In Indian civilization I am a Baptist, because I believe in immersing the Indians in our civilization and when we get them under holding them there until they are throughly soaked," asserted Richard

Henry Pratt, Brigadier General of the United States Army, in 1883 at the fiftieth anniversary of the World Convention at the invitation of the Baptists. This statement by Richard Henry Pratt set the tone for Indian Education for the last decades of the nineteenth century and much of the next century for generations of native people. In the late 1950's when I began school on the largest reservation in the United States, the Navajo, the Principal placed me in first grade because I could speak English and was one of the few students that could, though Navajo was my mother tongue.

The government's policy to assimilate Native people continued through the early 1970's. A major emphasis of this assimilation i.e. colonization policy meant to obliterate native people and therefore native languages on a national scale. In first grade most of my Navajo classmates spoke only Navajo. The teacher acting on behalf of the government in the day school that we attended made sure that we received punishment for speaking Navajo. Utter one word of Navajo and we found ourselves standing in the corner of the classroom or in the hallway. The most severe punishment brought the ruler down on our hands so that we would remember not to speak Navajo. We quickly learned that if we didn't want to be shamed in front of our classmates that we best speak our language in private far from the ears of the teachers or stop speaking. Meanwhile Dick and Jane books introduced us to the non-Navajo world and the "white man's" language. Having learned to read and write, this insidious process continued when we read that our ancestors, the indigenous people of this continent were "heathens, barbarians, devils, murderers of

innocent women and children, backward, uncivilized," and other distorted images that portrayed Native Americans as dehumanized icons that "stood in the way of progress," no doubt the same images that the rest of mainstream America was reading in textbooks. Assimilation made us feel ashamed for what we were, where we came from, how we spoke, our stories, our families, how we dressed, and for using our language. Later some well-intentioned Navajo parents prohibited their children from speaking Navajo at home to ensure their children's chances of "success in the white man's world." Knowing how to speak and read the "white man's language," it seemed, was a key to success in "his world."

As one who attended these schools, I was much rewarded for knowing English and quickly learning how to read. However, like my Navajo classmates, I believed English was the language of the enemy. The only way I was going to survive in "his" schools was to keep quiet, to disregard my native voice, and to allow my tongue to drown in the waters of assimilation.

I became afraid to express myself, preferring the quiet margins where no one noticed or expected anything of me. It wasn't until much later, after I graduated and received my Bachelors degree, that I decided to try creative writing. Though I had sometimes written "in secret," I was afraid to show my writing to anyone. My thinking was that no one would be interested in what I was expressing, that I had nothing worthwhile to voice. Like many beginning writers, I also feared exposing myself. Allowing my writing to be read by others, created feelings of anxiety because letting others read my writing

was like going naked in public. What business had I to delve into the business of writing, I thought. The very subject matter that I wanted to express had been tainted by distortions and stereotypes. And my native voice had been drowned (temporarily).

As an undergraduate student, literature classes offered few works by Native Americans that I could identify with, let alone courses in Native American literature. In graduate school, I was dissatisfied with the number of courses offered in the area of Native American Studies. On the other hand, myriad classes in traditional mainstream courses were offered. Minority literature was often defined as African-American literature and as soon as the quota for minority literature was filled, no other courses were added or instructors hired. Often the courses I took advanced only a Eurocentric view of aesthetics and theory. Like the previous learning I had been exposed to, the contributions of Native American was neglected, distorted or given minor attention, despite the current Native American literary renaissance.

Except in small doses, the language and literature of Native Americans remains invisible in the American school curriculum. Exclusion created uncomfortable situations in which Native American students like myself felt we had to constantly explain ourselves and our presence in and outside of the classroom. When writing critical papers my sense of aesthetics differed from Eurocentric values and I often felt I had to justify my values. When I became a Teaching Assistant, I naively thought that my students would come to class with open minds about minority literature.

During my first semester at teaching Composition and Ethnic Literature that included white ethnic literature, some of my first year students appeared irritated at midterm by the text that we were using. It seems some students had expected to read "American Literature" i.e. Thoreau, Mark Twain, and one student even asserted Shakespeare was American. Clearly, Ethnic Literature was not American, that is, not the "white man's literature," not what they had learned in high school and certainly not what they expected to learn in college. In my student's thinking, Ethnic literature was not credible and therefore, I, as a representative of that literature was not credible either. If what I had been reading and writing about during my educational journey was mainstream literature, why should Midwestern students' experience be any different? They had had no exposure to the voices of Ethnic literature let alone to Native American literature or to voices of native women. Given this invisibility, it was not surprising when my teaching evaluations included one comment that said I, as a woman of color, who had been "mistreated by white people," was now taking my revenge on my white students. Another white female student wrote on her quiz over Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony that she didn't think it was important for her to memorize the character's names because they weren't American names.

Later when I taught Native American Literature to again mostly white midwestern students, one of my teaching goals was to give substance to invisibility. I assigned students an essay by Paula Gunn Allen, who is among other things, a native woman who comes from

a matriarchal culture. After reading my student's journals, their comments expressed that they had no idea that matriarchy existed, or that in certain Indian tribes women possessed dignity, power and respect. Given this heretofore unknown fact, student's welcomed a lecture by me in which I was able to fill in gaps in their education, as I too come from a matriarchal culture. While my students listened to my presentation, I too began to feel changed. At last I felt that by giving voice to Native American issues, I was empowering myself, that I too was gaining a voice in literary academia. However, it also became apparent that some student's held notions of Native people as "other."

Some of my students saw in Black Elk Speaks the idealized and romanticized images and lifestyles of native people as shown in their journal writing. Drawn to this heretofore "undiscovered land," several of my students focused on the spirituality of Black Elk and his teachings and saw it perhaps as a means to fill voids in their personal and spiritual lives. This book was by far the the class's favorite.

While the students saw the idealized in native people, I couldn't help but think that they were responding to a way of life that was long past and a way some would prefer to see native people. On the other hand, students from an earlier semester who read contemporary Native American literature elicited responses like "this writing is too depressing" or "it's too dismal for me." How then does a teacher reconcile these opposing differences in student responses? How does a Native American woman teaching predominantly

white students gain credibility and voice in the classroom?

I had been schooled in theories and now these theories didn't seem to apply to these teaching issues I found myself in. Looking at how teaching and learning occurred in my native community, I saw that one way is by modelling or simply by doing a given activity. I also saw that learning can also take place by letting others voice their opinions while taking responsibility for it. The context that I bring to a class, my history, my language, my sense of who I am and where I come can't be ignored. By being honest and by being up front with my students at the beginning of the semester about the context I bring with me to my classroom helps to create an environment in which students acknowledge my presence and my voice. However, in order to enable my students to understand Native American literature, I have to do a lot of framework building that focuses on history, cultural studies, art, including historical events that challenges my student's comfortable world view.

By showing and modelling my writing process students can see that writing doesn't always come easy for me either. I tell my students that I failed my English placement exam and was told to take remedial writing. I tell my students about my personal history and about how writing for me is an empowering experience when I sit down in front of the word processor. And I tell them coyote stories and other Navajo tales. I don't know what effect that has on my students, except that they tell me they like my stories. I hope that by telling these stories the imaginative possibilities of language and writing opens for my students. Of course, not all my students

will be touched by what I have to offer, but by giving them opportunities to reach for their own voices, by opening the door that allows them to go beyond their self-made and culturally-made boundaries and by presenting them with opportunities to empower themselves through language will I have presented possibilities where students can make a more realized journey through language. Moreover, as a Woman of Color, I gain a further sense of having given substance to the invisible by reclaiming my voice and space.